

**Interview with Donald Lucas
Conducted by Linda Byrne for the
Providence District History Project
Providence Perspective**

May 24, 2010

Linda: Today is May the 24th, 2010, I am Linda Byrne at Supervisor Linda Smyth's office and I am sitting with Donald Lucas for the purposes of an interview for the Providence Perspective History Project. How are you Donald?

Donald: Just fine.

Linda: You have indicated that you have some photographs of the Johnston Auto Body Shop in Merrifield.

Donald: Yes, and I am having those digitized right now down at the Pan Am Shopping Center at that photo shop at Pan Am. They will be ready on Thursday and I'll get them on Thursday and bring them to you or I'll get them to you early next week. But they are being digitized right now.

Linda: Tell me a little about yourself - how you came to Fairfax County.

Donald: Okay, I was, I was born and raised in the Shenandoah Valley in a town called Elkton, Virginia just off of Swift Run Gap off of Skyline Drive. And in 1952 I was selected for an apprentice program at Fort Belvoir, Virginia - the luckiest day of my life.

Linda: Fort Belvoir

Donald: Fort Belvoir.

Linda: Ah hum.

Donald: I went to Fort Belvoir the second of October, of 1952 as a wage grade 5 mechanics helper on an apprentice program and 37 years later I retired as a GS 15.

Linda: Wonderful.

Donald: Best thing that ever happened to me. But I've lived in you know from Alexandria to Fairfax County I lived in. In Fairfax County I lived in Burke, I have owned a couple of houses in the City of Fairfax. I've lived in the City of Fairfax several times; ah probably more there than any place else; I lived there off of in the Auto Woods Subdivision. I've been there for nineteen years; previous to that I lived on Blake Lane for 19 years so ah I'm familiar with the area. I first moved to – rented an apartment – most of the time I lived down here with my family. My mother and father we lived in Alexandria, Springfield and Burke.

Linda: So you've seen some changes here.

Donald: Oh absolutely, absolutely. My first trip down Route 1 which is not in Providence District of course, but my first trip down Route 1 was in the fall of 1949 and what sticks in my mind about that was my mother's brother in law had just bought a new 1949 Ford. That was the first car of the modern body style. And we came down to visit an uncle that lived in College Park, Maryland and from there we went to Newport News down Route 1 and I road past Fort Belvoir. And several years later in 1951 when my high school class came to Washington for their trip we road past Fort Belvoir. That was my second time – no idea that a year later I'd walk through that gate and spend 8 years there and in another 8 years some place else and ten years there; and I'd spend the rest of my life in Fairfax County but ah that's the way it is.

Ah, the pictures I have of Johnston's Auto Body, ah I had a car painted by Mr. Johnston and it always intrigued me in case nobody's ever told you he Mr. Johnson told me that this shop, the building that he had there was known as Johnston's Auto Body was a building designed by under the auspices of the Texaco Corporation. And what they were looking for was a service station that the operator would have living quarters over the top of

it. So that building was built as a two bay gasoline station a bay with a lift in it for changing oil and another one for minor maintenance and washing the car. And the idea was that the family would live over top of it in a two bedroom apartment. And that's the way that building was designed.

Mr. Johnston told me that he had had a gas station at Tyson's corner and I don't know whether it was the widening or what happened but he was, the State bought him out and he used his proceeds from that sale to buy this property at Merrifield where he opened up an auto body shop and paint shop. I had him paint a car for me one time and it was very unique. I remember going in several times while the car was being processed and Mr. Johnston would be sitting back in a rocking chair with his shoes off, bibbed overalls and no shirt. Anybody that comes in you better have green stuff because he didn't take checks or credit cards. If you had a bill with him you paid in cash. He'd have a big roll of bills in his pocket. He's deceased I'm sure I haven't heard anything in fact; I did know his son-in-law or one of his former son-in-laws Win Kanesnie. And I think Mr. Johnston died about 15 years ago.

Linda: But that house was quite a landmark with the art work on it.

Donald: Yes it was, yes it was, I use to say it was one of the architectural wonders of Fairfax County.

Linda and Donald: Laughing.

Donald: Yeah it's in Providence District and what I remember most coming down here as a child maybe from 1940 to 1943, I was born in 1934 was coming down here as a kid to see relatives that lived in College Park. Most of the time my dad would talk about the decision he had to make in Fairfax Circle as to whether or not to come up Arlington Boulevard and go across Key Bridge or whether to come up Rtes. 29-211 and go across ah what's the the bridge at Rosslyn

Linda: Oh, the one at Rosslyn is Key Bridge

Donald: Key Bridge yeah that's right

Linda: yes

Donald: Key Bridge, Memorial Bridge and 14th Street Bridge. Which one of those two bridges to cross and it really didn't make too much difference because you got up to Thomas Circle, Logan Circle and he'd take Rhode Island Avenue out to Route 1 anyway so it didn't make much difference but it was always a discussion which way to come. So I've been up both roads, we probably came up Rtes. 29-211 most, I remember what had made it loop in past where the Saudi Arabians are building that big building.

One of the two three lane highway that I remember – Route 11 over in the Shenandoah Valley was a three lane highway, and my recollection is that from Fairfax Circle through Falls Church into Rosslyn for the most part Rtes. 29-211 was a three lane highway.

Linda: Three lanes in each direction?

Donald: No it was three lanes; one lane in each direction and a passing lane in the middle.

Linda: Ah.

Donald: You know it was marked for passing

Linda: Yes.

Donald: Where in certain places you could pass in the middle.

Linda: When would that have changed – do you have any idea?

Donald: Probably in the late 50's. At Fairfax Circle when you left Fairfax Circle coming up Lee highway there was a Howard Johnsons on the Hill where the donut shop is now and up the road a little bit, just before you get to Blake Lane was a motel – what we kids use to refer to as a hot sheet joint. And a couple lived across Blake lane from the motel and their names were Sweeny. Her Dad had a dairy farm where the Army Navy Country

Club is now and she told me one time when I was sitting on the porch talking to her (I was probably in my early forties and she was eighty five close to ninety years of age) but she said that where the Home Depot is now that's where her Daddy had their dairy barn.

Linda: Oh, and that's right off of Fairfax Circle.

Donald: Yes, that's off of Fairfax Circle, Old Lee Highway.

Linda: Yes.

Donald: And she said that under that the drainage ditch that runs under Pickett Road, where Pickett Road now comes into Rte. 237 – Old Lee Highway that that drainage ditch was put in by Italian POW labor. And I remember seeing the POW camp at Camp Washington during the War years. When we'd come up through here you looked over you were coming up Lee Highway when you get to Camp Washington you looked over to the back of where those auto – where they are building a Walgreens now and there's two or three automobile agencies in through there. It's a subdivision now but that was an Italian POW camp so I was told. But I remember seeing the tar, the buildings in there the frame buildings in there that were covered with tar paper.

Linda: And that would have been 1943?

Donald: Oh, 1943, 1944 time frame.

Linda: So times have really changed.

Donald: Yes, they have.

Linda: And the population here has exploded.

Donald: Yes, I got out of the Army was released from active duty to the Army reserve in ah the spring of 1958 and I'd gotten married the previous Thanksgiving. And my wife and I moved into an apartment complex in the, it was in the, town of Fairfax that was behind the Breezeway Motel. And,

the Howard, the ah McDonalds that's there beside the Paul the Sixth School there was a friend in Fairfax High School that was under construction. I could look out the bedroom window and see that McDonalds being built. I remember going down to the Honda dealer when that building was a Theatre.

Linda: Oh, I didn't realize it was a movie theatre.

Donald: Yes, there beside Jim McKay's across. The building that Jim McKay now has as an office for his truck sales was a residence. There were folks that lived in that. You go on down passed University

Linda: And we are on Route 50.

Donald: On Route 50 before you get to the circle. That's when everybody took Route 50.

Linda: Yes

Donald: Ah there's a GM, GM had a training center up on that hill recently and it's now become a furniture store. But I can remember when that was a trailer park and they had cabins up in there. A lot of changes.

Linda: Yes. Do you have children?

Donald: Um hum I have 3 boys.

Linda: And they grew up here in Fairfax County.

Donald: Yes, one lives in Orange, one lives in the Shenandoah Valley, and one lives in Fairfax.

Linda: What were the schools like for them?

Donald: I can't really – yeah – the kids went to God I don't know where they went. Michael went to Fairfax; no Michael went to Oakton; because at the time he was in school he was in school we were on Blake Lane.

Linda: What was the address on Blake Lane? Do you remember?

Donald: 9528. I still own a house in the subdivision; I own 9518 Blake Lane as a rental property. We moved into the subdivision which is called Blake View and it was probably the third townhouse community build along Blake Lane. The one on Linden Brook Street was the first one and then there was a set of townhouses across Blake Lane from Linden Brook and I can't remember the name of them – Providence something.

Linda: um hum.

Donald: And then there were some condominiums further down the street before you get to Five Oaks Road. Five Oaks Road brings something to mind....

Linda: ah hun

Donald: That development, Five Oaks Road and Platen Drive was developed by an acquaintance of mine by the name of Randy Pratten and he is a story within himself. I worked with Randy in the office of the Chief of Engineers at the time he was developing that subdivision and he had it platted and 6 or 7 houses built when the I 66 came through and he already had the land platted and couple of houses built so the State had to negotiate with him on a lot by lot basis to purchase the land to put 66 through. And while all that negotiation was taking place he had purchased some land up off of the river just above from the bridge where- Cabin John Bridge. So when he got through with the negotiations with the State he turned to the attorney for the State and he said when is the company that's putting the gas line in, and I'll tell you the name of that Company in a minute, when are they going to be ready to talk about the property up on the river. And the guy said you own property up there on the river and Randy said yes and they ran that pipeline right through my property on the river so – Colonial and G gas line.

Ah Randy and Rosily I think are both deceased now – Randy's dead and Rosily would have to be way over a hundred years of age if she was still living.

I bought my first house in 1959; I paid thirteen thousand dollars for it on Roberts Road in the City of Fairfax – town of Fairfax. At the same time I bought a house Randy Platten bought a Rolls Royce and paid nineteen thousand for it.

Linda: Oh my goodness.

Donald: [Laughing] – paid more for his Rolls Royce than I did for my house.

Linda: I imagine that Rolls Royce is not worth as much as that house though today. It would be worth a lot but....

Donald: Ah – no, they're pretty, ah you know, it was a six cylinder Rolls Royce and today they would probably ah a 1959 Rolls Royce would probably bring - oh it would bring what he paid for it; it would bring twice what he paid for it. If it was in pristine condition it would bring at least twice what he paid for it.

Linda: Ah hum.

Donald: Yep: In a yesterday's New York Times there was an article in there about a gentlemen from just east of St. Louis, about 90 miles east of St. Louis, in 1964 sold 30 Bugattis. Bugattis were all one off cars, all custom body cars; he sold 30 of them for 85 thousand dollars. There were pictures in the paper of the cars being loaded on a train just east of St. Louis on the way to the freight folder. One of the Bugattis sold recently for 10 million and another one sold for 28 million.

Linda: Oh my goodness. And he sold 30 of them in 1964 did you say?

Donald: Yeah, for 85 thousand dollars.

Linda: Oh my goodness.

Donald: And both the gentlemen who sold them and the Frenchmen who bought them were both murdered.

Linda: Oh my goodness.

Donald: [Laughing] Not as a consequence of that. But in subsequent years they were both murdered.

Linda: My goodness. Any other memories of Fairfax County you would like to share with us?

Donald: My Mom and Dad lived in Burke at Keene Mill Road we'd come down to Fairfax Corners and turn on Rolling Road and take Keene Mill Road into Springfield. From Fairfax Corners to Springfield you rode through the woods with woods on both sides of the road. This was in the early 1950's.

Linda: Was it paved?

Donald: Yes, it was paved but it was woods on both sides of the road. And one day they had knocked, bull dozers had come in and they knocked probably 2 acres of trees down on the north side of Keene Mill Road just past its intersection with Rolling Road and over the next couple of months they built a brick building there. And my Dad kept talking about what the hell is that building going in there for? And then when the sign went on it Telephone exchange, he said why in the world are they building a big telephone exchange building like that out here. Now we know don't we.

Linda and Donald: [Laughing]

Linda: Yes we do. Well, I thank you very much.